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Ending the Cold War

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I was at the 1997 World Youth Chess Championship in Cannes, France. After playing an exhausting seven rounds of chess with games lasting as long as seven hours, as one of the leaders of the pack, I was in medal contention.

In the chess world, mostly ex-Soviet countries dominate. Each country is allowed to send two representatives and all of the former soviet Republics, now countries, milk this rule to the extreme. There were two representatives from Georgia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Latvia, and so on, and finally two from Russia. They all speak the same language and most of them train together. To me they are all the same. It doesn't matter if their nationality is masked with the flag of Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan; they are all Russian and have the names of Igor, Alexander, Boris, Dimitry, Ivan, et cetera. While half the contestants consist of these ex-Soviet participants, the Russians are the most respected and feared, the "top guns." All the smaller newly-formed republics bow to this alpha male of a chess country. Yet, beating these countries is like battling the Hydra. If you chop off one of their heads in one round, they seem to multiply and you have to face another one the next round.

After I beat the Romanian champion in round 7., it was time to face the heavyweights. At my level of competition, hundreds of my games and those of my opponents are recorded in databases. Before every game, each player researches the other and figures out his opponent's strengths and weaknesses. They may

adapt their own style to exploit these weaknesses at the cost of being unfamiliar with the opening variations.

That morning, I learned that I had to face European Champion Ilya Zarezenko, the **main** Russian. I was definitely the underdog. The Russians must have been smiling! Free point for Ilya! After all, I was only an American. The glory days of Fischer versus Spassky were long over. Even though my coach and I knew that Zarezenko and the whole network of ex-Soviets were researching my games and were probably calling the best grandmasters in the world to help my opponent figure out how to beat me, we chose not to deviate from my normal variations. If I were going to go down, I was going to play my pride and joy opening. I knew it the best and was most comfortable with it. This Russian would have to beat me at my own game!

In these types of tournaments, each player has his nameplate and flag next to him so that the audience can identify who is who. I arrived the morning of the round and saw the coolest thing ever. Next to my name there was the American flag, and across from it was Russia's. It was like a replay of the Cold War days. With the pride of my country at stake, I was going to play my heart out. I had nothing to lose and everything to gain. The pressure was on my opponent. Most families are taken care of by the Russian government if their children do well. If they lose, they would lose all privileges.

The round started and I could tell that Zarezenko had prepared for me because he was blitzing off his opening moves. It is very nerve-

racking knowing that you are walking into anyone's preparations, especially someone from the Russian Federation, but it was too late to abort the game plan. In the "middle game" the real fight began. At the international level, one inaccurate move can lead to a loss. Though everything was going fine generally, I did make a few microscopically imprecise moves, but Zarezenko was oblivious to them. This Goliath of an opponent was human after all! Unfortunately, I became overaggressive and started showing weaknesses in my position as a result of my trying too hard to win. Zarezenko spotted them and quickly turned the tables putting me on the defense. Using my time on the clock in order to come up with resources to parry his blows, I got myself in horrible time trouble. We entered the endgame stage with his having the advantage, but he used up a lot of time trying to put the nails into my coffin. We both were in time pressure with our hands flying across the board to make each move. Then, unbelievably, he made a gross blunder. At first, I thought he must have some hidden reason for his move, since gross errors aren't made often by someone of his standing. Suddenly, I realized that this was indeed a blunder and made my move. When I looked up, my enemy looked as if he had been shot by glares from the Russian coaches. He knew that he and his family were going to suffer for making such a howler of a move, especially against the American. He didn't even try to win by running me out of time. Lost mentally, he immediately resigned.

What a mix of emotions then emerged! I was ecstatic, having beaten the toughest Russian, but

I felt sorry for him as well. I knew that he was going to have to face his coaches. Not being able to believe the outcome, the ex-Soviet participants hovered around the board to see what had happened. Even the tournament director checked twice to verify the result. Though Russians are probably more stoic than most people, my opponent simply broke down and cried.

Amazingly, the next day something happened that I will never forget. During my next-round game, Zarezenko came up to me and shook my hand, thereby showing his great character. This unexpected moment was the greatest prize I could have won and taken back from that tournament. I had thought he was the enemy. We set out to defeat each other but ended up allies. The Cold War vanished. In this way, chess has brought me closer to people I've met from many parts of the world.